



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 25 June 2008

St Maximus the Confessor

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today I would like to present the figure of one of the great Fathers of the Eastern Church in later times. He is a monk, St Maximus, whose fearless courage in witnessing to - "confessing" - even while suffering, the integrity of his faith in Jesus Christ, true God and true man, Saviour of the world, earned him Christian Tradition's title of *Confessor*. Maximus was born in Palestine, the land of the Lord, in about 580. As a boy he was initiated to the monastic life and the study of the Scriptures through the works of Origen, the great teacher who by the third century had already "established" the exegetic tradition of Alexandria.

Maximus moved from Jerusalem to Constantinople and from there, because of the barbarian invasions, sought refuge in Africa. Here he was distinguished by his extreme courage in the defence of orthodoxy. Maximus refused to accept any reduction of Christ's humanity. A theory had come into being which held that there was only one will in Christ, the divine will. To defend the oneness of Christ's Person, people denied that he had his own true and proper human will. And, at first sight, it might seem to be a good thing that Christ had only one will. But St Maximus immediately realized that this would destroy the mystery of salvation, for humanity without a will, a man without a will, is not a real man but an amputated man. Had this been so, the man Jesus Christ would not have been a true man, he would not have experienced the drama of being human which consists, precisely, of conforming our will with the great truth of being. Thus St Maximus declared with great determination: Sacred Scripture does not portray to us an amputated man with no will but rather true and complete man: God, in Jesus Christ, really assumed the totality of being

human - obviously with the exception of sin - hence also a human will. And said like this, his point is clear: Christ either is or is not a man. If he is a man, he also has a will. But here the problem arises: do we not end up with a sort of dualism? Do we not reach the point of affirming two complete personalities: reason, will, sentiment? How is it possible to overcome dualism, to keep the completeness of the human being and yet succeed in preserving the unity of the Person of Christ who was not schizophrenic? St Maximus demonstrates that man does not find his unity, the integration of himself or his totality within himself but by surpassing himself, by coming out of himself. Thus, also in Christ, by coming out of himself, man finds himself in God, in the Son of God. It is not necessary to amputate man to explain the Incarnation; all that is required is to understand the dynamism of the human being who is fulfilled only by coming out of himself; it is in God alone that we find ourselves, our totality and our completeness. Hence, we see that the person who withdraws into himself is not a complete person but the person who is open, who comes out of himself, becomes complete and finds himself, finds his true humanity, precisely in the Son of God. For St Maximus, this vision did not remain a philosophical speculation; he saw it realized in Jesus' actual life, especially in the drama of Gethsemane. In this drama of Jesus' agony, of the anguish of death, of the opposition between the human will not to die and the divine will which offers itself to death, in this drama of Gethsemane the whole human drama is played out, the drama of our redemption. St Maximus tells us that, and we know that this is true, Adam (and we ourselves are Adam) thought that the "no" was the peak of freedom. He thought that only a person who can say "no" is truly free; that if he is truly to achieve his freedom, man must say "no" to God; only in this way he believed he could at last be himself, that he had reached the heights of freedom. This tendency also carried within it the human nature of Christ, but went beyond it, for Jesus saw that it was not the "no" that was the height of freedom. The height of freedom is the "yes", in conformity with God's will. It is only in the "yes" that man truly becomes himself; only in the great openness of the "yes", in the unification of his will with the divine, that man becomes immensely open, becomes "divine". What Adam wanted was to be like God, that is, to be completely free. But the person who withdraws into himself is not divine, is not completely free; he is freed by emerging from himself, it is in the "yes" that he becomes free; and this is the drama of Gethsemane: not my will but yours. It is by transferring the human will to the divine will that the real person is born, it is in this way that we are redeemed. This, in a few brief words, is the fundamental point of what St Maximus wanted to say and here we see that the whole human being is truly at issue; the entire question of our life lies here. In Africa St Maximus was already having problems defending this vision of man and of God. He was then summoned to Rome. In 649 he took an active part in the Lateran Council, convoked by Pope Martin I to defend the two wills of Christ against the Imperial Edict which - *pro bono pacis* - forbade discussion of this matter. Pope Martin was made to pay dearly for his courage. Although he was in a precarious state of health, he was arrested and taken to Constantinople. Tried and condemned to death, the Pope obtained the commutation of his sentence into permanent exile in the Crimea, where he died on 16 September 655, after two long years of humiliation and torment.

It was Maximus' turn shortly afterwards, in 662, as he too opposed the Emperor, repeating: "It

cannot be said that Christ has a single will!" (cf. *PG* 91, cc. 268-269). Thus, together with his two disciples, both called Anastasius, Maximus was subjected to an exhausting trial although he was then over 80 years of age. The Emperor's tribunal condemned him with the accusation of heresy, sentencing him to the cruel mutilation of his tongue and his right hand - the two organs through which, by words and writing, Maximus had fought the erroneous doctrine of the single will of Christ. In the end, thus mutilated, the holy monk was finally exiled to the region of Colchis on the Black Sea where he died, worn out by the suffering he had endured, at the age of 82, on 13 August that same year, 662.

In speaking of Maximus' life, we mentioned his literary opus in defence of orthodoxy. We referred in particular to the *Disputation with Pyrrhus*, formerly Patriarch of Constantinople: in this debate he succeeded in persuading his adversary of his errors. With great honesty, in fact, Pyrrhus concluded the *Disputation* with these words: "I ask forgiveness for myself and for those who have preceded me: by ignorance we arrived at these absurd ideas and arguments; and I ask that a way may be found to cancel these absurdities, saving the memory of those who erred" (*PG* 91, c. 352). Also several dozen important works have been handed down to us, among which the *Mystagogia* is outstanding. This is one of St Maximus' most important writings, which gathers his theological thought in a well-structured synthesis.

St Maximus' thought was never merely theological, speculative or introverted because its target was always the practical reality of the world and its salvation. In this context in which he had to suffer, he could not escape into purely theoretical and philosophical affirmations. He had to seek the meaning of life, asking himself: who am I? What is the world? God entrusted to man, created in his image and likeness, the mission of unifying the cosmos. And just as Christ unified the human being in himself, the Creator unified the cosmos in man. He showed us how to unify the cosmos in the communion of Christ and thus truly arrived at a redeemed world. Hans Urs von Balthasar, one of the greatest theologians of the 20th century, referred to this powerful saving vision when, "relaunching" Maximus - he defined his thought with the vivid expression *Kosmische Liturgie*, "cosmic liturgies". Jesus, the one Saviour of the world, is always at the centre of this solemn "liturgy". The efficacy of his saving action which definitively unified the cosmos is guaranteed by the fact that in spite of being God in all things, he is also integrally a man and has the "energy" and will of a man.

The life and thought of Maximus were powerfully illumined by his immense courage in witnessing to the integral reality of Christ, without any reduction or compromise. And thus who man really is and how we should live in order to respond to our vocation appears. We must live united to God in order to be united to ourselves and to the cosmos, giving the cosmos itself and humanity their proper form. Christ's universal "yes" also shows us clearly how to put all the other values in the right place. We think of values that are justly defended today such as tolerance, freedom and dialogue. But a tolerance that no longer distinguishes between good and evil would become chaotic and self-destructive, just as a freedom that did not respect the freedom of others or find

the common measure of our respective liberties would become anarchy and destroy authority. Dialogue that no longer knows what to discuss becomes empty chatter. All these values are important and fundamental but can only remain true values if they have the point of reference that unites them and gives them true authenticity. This reference point is the synthesis between God and the cosmos, the figure of Christ in which we learn the truth about ourselves and thus where to rank all other values, because we discover their authentic meaning. Jesus Christ is the reference point that gives light to all other values. This was the conclusion of the great Confessor's witness. And it is in this way, ultimately, that Christ indicates that the cosmos must become a liturgy, the glory of God, and that worship is the beginning of true transformation, of the true renewal of the world.

I would therefore like to conclude with a fundamental passage from one of St Maximus' works: "We adore one Son together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning before all time, is now and ever shall be, for all time and for the time after time. Amen!" (*PG* 91, c. 269).

To special groups:

Dear Brothers and Sisters, I offer a warm welcome, together with the assurance of my closeness in prayer, to the group of pilgrims from the International Foundation for the Service of Deaf Persons. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims, especially those from England, Scotland, the Netherlands, Iceland, Sweden, Pakistan and the United States of America, I cordially invoke God's blessings of joy and peace.

© Copyright 2008 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana